News from Ed Markey

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NRC FAULTS SEABROOK SAFETY SYSTEM DURING MARCH STORM

Washington, D.C. -- Representative Edward J. Markey (D-MA) today released the results of a Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) investigation into an emergency shutdown of the Seabrook Nuclear Power Plant following a loss of offsite power and the failure of certain safety-related equipment during a severe winter storm on March 5, 2001. In the report, the NRC found that the loss of offsite power at the plant "was complicated by some safety-related equipment failures," and that Seabrook operators had failed to take appropriate steps to address known equipment deficiencies at the plant, in violation of NRC regulations. However, the agency also indicated that it was declining to take any enforcement action against the plant operator for this violation.

Rep. Markey, a senior member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, which has jurisdiction over the NRC, explained, "Nuclear power plants require reliable supplies of offsite power to operate safety systems, combined with on-site emergency power generators in case external power gets cut off. In the past, Seabrook has experienced reliability problems with its diesel generators. This March, its off-site power went out when a winter storm short-circuited the power lines. If both systems were ever to go down at once, we would be facing a potential nuclear catastrophe. And if an accident occurred in the middle of a severe winter storm, it might be all but impossible to safely evacuate the public."

The NRC's report was provided in response to an April 13, 2001, inquiry by Rep. Markey into the shutdown of the Seabrook nuclear plant due to severe winter weather on March 5, 2001. In his response, NRC Chairman Richard Meserve reported that a special investigation team "found that the licensee failed to fully address some previous equipment problems which contributed to this event." Specifically, the NRC wrote, "Based on the results of the inspection we found that Seabrook failed to implement timely and appropriate corrective actions to address two known equipment deficiencies involving the turbine driven emergency feedwater pump and the 345 kv line bushings." Enclosed with Chairman Meserve's letter was the special inspection team's report, which detailed the causes of the technical failures.

The March storm interrupted the three offsite power line connections to the plant, leading to the plant shutdown and activation of the emergency diesel generators, which previously have been afflicted with reliability problems. Since a radiological emergency during weather conditions that would preclude emergency evacuation could pose risks to the public, Rep. Markey indicated in his letter of inquiry that prudence would suggest that the plant be shut down in anticipation of severe weather.

Seabrook's procedures for severe weather conditions recommend that the plant be shut down if it will imminently be impacted by high wind conditions exceeding 96 miles per hour. During the storm on March 5, 2001, winds averaged 20 miles per hour with gusts exceeding 50 miles per hour. The storm blew wet snow onto certain "bushings" (devices which provide a transition from overhead power lines to Seabrook's internal power lines).

The special inspection team's report indicated that the operators had followed the standard procedures for operating nuclear plants during severe weather conditions in advance of the storm. However, during the storm the power lines

providing electricity needed to operate safety systems at the plant were shorted out due to arcing across certain high voltage bushings due to snow accumulation. The NRC reported that a similar episode had occurred in 1997, but the licensee's corrective actions were cited by the special investigation team's report as insufficient to guard against the arcing that occurred in March 2001. Additionally, while "the licensee did place a caution in the severe weather procedure" regarding the bushings in severe winter weather, they "did not provide instructions to verify the flashover did not impact a line and the actions needed to promptly restore a line to service."

The special investigation team also found that the licensee had neglected to make corrective maintenance on the turbine driven emergency feedwater pump, which failed shortly after the plant shutdown on March 5, 2001, and this "was determined to be a violation" of certain NRC rules. However, the NRC decided to treat this as "a non-cited violation" under its enforcement discretion policy. The NRC did not cite the short-circuiting of the power line bushings as a violation, as it does not regard these bushings as safety-related systems.

With respect to evacuation plans in the event of a nuclear accident during a severe winter storm, the NRC indicated that it has asked the Federal Emergency Management Agency to report on the provisions of state and local emergency plans for the areas surrounding Seabrook in the event of a radiological emergency during a severe winter storm.

Rep. Markey concluded, "Given the grave potential consequences of a nuclear accident, we need the NRC to be vigilant in assuring that reactor operators maintain the highest level of commitment to safety. But what they've done here is to say that Seabrook broke the rules but the NRC isn't going to penalize them for it. Such complacency is frequently the forerunner of disaster."

Copies of Rep. Markey's inquiry and the NRC response can be found on the Congressman's website at www.house.gov/markey/nuclear.htm.

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